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MOBIUS

By Stephen King

Wayne Parsons shifted his pile of books from one arm to the other and hurried in the walk toward the sprawl of the Westhaven Physical Sciences complex, wondering just what the hell Dr. Weaver wanted that was so important.

He paused for a moment on the lowest step leading up to the lab where the Mobius was housed, and slapped his free hand on the cold granite snout of the gryphon that guarded the door. Once he had liked and respected Dr. Weaver. He still respected him. But now there was something new in him, something offcenter. It was hard to put a finger on.

Far down the hallways, he could hear someone moving ponderously. Someone very big, and from the sound, very clumsy. Parsons frowned a little. The janitors were supposed to be out by four.

He twitched his nose and forced himself to wait in the fall cool for a moment longer. Offcenter or no, he was still flattered that Weaver had called for him and not Brooks, or the Swiss student, Johannes. And excited as hell, he admitted to himself. Who wouldn't be, at the chance to do a little extra homework on the biggest thing since the moon landings a decade ago?

The thumping footsteps grew louder. Someone running.

Parsons looked up at the heavy glass doors, and they suddenly burst open.

The monstrosity shoved past them.

It was huge. It was a titanic blasphemy of grey, heaving flesh that shivered like massive cliffs of melting Crisco.

It stared down at him, head almost brushing to pneumatic door-closing device, screaming soundlessly. The dying fires of the sunset

lit the features of its medicine-ball head grotesquely.

Then he heard the gun.

It fired four times, flat, toneless blasts no louder than the sharp clapping of hands. A couple crossing the street not twenty yards away did not look up.

The monstrosity fell forward.

Its head smashed on the steps like a rotten pumpkin, and thick, jellylike blood splattered warmly across the backs of Parsons' hands. He crammed his fingers into his mouth to hold back the screech welling in his throat.

Then Dr. Weaver appeared above it, like the gaunt familier of fallen warlock. "For God's sake, don't just stand there! Help me move it!"

Parsons moved numbly to the top of the steps; and edged gingerly around the tremendous girth of the thing without touching it. Sweet God, he thought. It must weight five hundred pounds.

"Don't look at it," Weaver said as he bent over it. "Grab a leg. Be quick, dammit!"

"I saw," Parsons said tonelessly. "I saw the face."

Dr. Weaver was pointing the gun at him. In the failing light Parsons could see it was a very small pistol, perhaps only a target-range .22. And yet it would do the job, if Weaver pulled the trigger. Nicely.

"Grab a leg," Dr. Weaver repeated, "or I'll shoot you. Dead."

Parsons grabbed a leg. It was warm and disgustingly gelatinous; his fingers sank deep into the pale skin. The monstrosity was clad only in a loose grey kilt.

They pulled it into the hall, head bumping and lolling over the jamb, and Parsons stood up panting, flexing sore muscles, while Weaver swung the double doors shut and snapped the Yale lock. The gun-muzzle

never wavered from Parsons' belly.

"You saw," he repeated.

Parsons nodded. His tongue would not serve him. He was lost in the blue folds of shock.

"If you have hysterics, you'll scream," Dr. Weaver said gently. "And if you scream, I'll have to shoot you. don't scream, hum?"

Parsons shook his head. Then, with great difficulty: "I want to look again."

"It's better that you don't. There's a lot that has to be done."

"I...have to look." Parsons stared down at the shadowy mountain of flesh, at the lumpy skull plastered with unclean grey stubble, at the outflung arms as thick around as railroad ties.

Dr. Weaver shrugged. "As you say."

He thumbed up the lights, and the empty hall glowed cooly under the flourescents. At the far end Parsons could see the stairwell behind the broken guard-chain. The sign that had been suspended from it--ONLY AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL BEYOND THIS POINT! PLEASE SHOW GUARD ON DUTY YOUR PASS!---lay on the floor.

"You won't scream, will you?" Weaver asked with almost asexual kindness. "I shouldn't want that."

"No,"

Parsons bent, and grimacine with disgust, levered his arms under the mammoth chest. With a convulsive shove that made his knees crack, he got it turned over. One arm flopped across the face, and he pushed it away.

The forehead and frontal area of the skull were quite shattered but the features were clear enough.

Wayne Parsons stared down at Wayne Parsons.

Time spun out in a golden chrysalis.

Parsons stared with frozen fascination at the flattened, widened, ,grossened features that were his own. At a huge mole beneath the left nostril, at a scar on the flabby wedge of the chin. His fingers touched them on his own face, smaller, but exactly the same.

It was him. He was the monstrosity and the monstrosity was him. He was dead and alive. He weighed one hundred and sixty one, and he weighed a quarter of a ton.

It was madness.

"You're going to scream," Weaver chided. "I can see it."

Parsons tried to scream. He tried to scream what have you done! hoarsely and melodramatically, but nothing came out of his mouth but one wet croak and a silver thread of saliva. He wiped it slowly away, and as he stared at the deadly sanity of Weaver's pistol, the hysteria ebbed.

"Got control?" Weaver asked. "All right; come on."

"Tell me," Parsons said. His voice seemed to come from far away. He thought of his books, scattered on the steps beyond the door, in another world. "Tell me from the start."

Weaver motioned him past. They walked up the hall, footsteps echoing dimly and disappearing into the shadowy porcelain-and-tile depths. His voice took on a strange, dreaming cadence. "The beginning was the Mobius, Mr. Parsons, but the prologue was Time--"

"Damn it, tell me!" His voice began to climb, and he forced it down as the gun jammed into the small of his back.

"I'll tell it my way or not at all. I could send you into this blindfolded. It might be better if I did."

Their footfalls clanged on the downspiralling stairs. Parsons could hear the quietly steady hum of the nuclear engine that powered the Mobius.

"You know some of the possibilities," Weaver said from behind him. "Perpetual motion, anti-gravity, perhaps even a kind of stardrive, if we ever figure out the principles behind it. But Dr. Hartung says that may take development of a whole new mathematics, where non-parallel lines never cross and division by zero is defined..."

Parsons wondered if he would go mad, completely mad, before Weaver came around to the point. He bit his tongue and curled his hands into fists.

"But, all that is neither here nor there, is it? Because the prime possibility of the Mobius is--"

"Time travel," Parsons said, and again he saw the monstrosity that was himself, and fear began an icy crawling in his guts.

The first paradox of theoretical time-travel: If one travels from present to the immiediate past, say one hour earlier, one may encounter himself.

Parsons stopped on the last stair, frozen. He stared at the big doorway, and a pulse beat in his neck. It stood ajar. A scrap of coarse grey kilt-cloth hung on the lock.

"Thinking of your first theoretical paradox?" Weaver asked.

Parsons did not answer. He thought of driving an elbow into Weaver's groin, disarming, him, and beating his head to a shapeless pulp against the steel stairs. He dismissed it; his attempt would only be turned aside. He had already entered the Mobius...or had he? If he killed Dr. Weaver, wouldn't the grossly altered blasphemy that was himself simply be wiped away? Expunged from the blackboard of time?

"You're wondering," Weaver said, his voice flat and unechoing in the soundproof lower chamber, "if killing me would alter your dentiny. And the answer is another question: Can you afford to find out?

"Stand over by the door."

Parsons steered away from the stairs and faced Weaver. He sat down, keeping the target-pistol pointed in Parsons' general direction.

"As you know, all expiriments of a practical nature have been banned, with good reason, by the trustees for a period of not less than ten years, so the theoreticists can look at all the consequences that the Mobius implies--time-travel in particular. There has always been the probability that the incurrence of any of the theoretical paradoxes--meeting yourself, changing the past, killing an ancestor, to mention a few--would not prove or disprove the paradox, but simply destroy the universe. The fact that we can't imagine it does not preclude it." He paused, listening to the rumble of the pile. One long, thin-fingered hand reached up and pulled the scrap of grey cloth from the lock. He fingered it reflectively.

"So the trustees were quite right. But ten Years, Parsons! Ten! I'm fifty-nine now! In ten years I'll he only one year from compulsive retirement! And who's to say it wouldn't he fifteen or twenty or a hundred" Who's to say it might not be never? I couldn't stand that." He shrugged apologeticallv. "I had to know."

"You had to know," Parsons repeated. He stared stupidly at Weaver, only beginning, to grasp the edge of what the doctor had done because he Had To Know.

"You understand," Weaver said, relieved. "I'm not a mad scientist ...not a Victor Frankenstein. Just an old man who had to find out one more thing."

"And if the universe <u>had</u> been--"

'It wasn't." Weaver looked at his watch. "I came down here almost a half an hour ago, and set the Mobius in operation at seven o'clock sharp. My idea was this: I would bring you down here at seven-thirty, just as I have, and send you back fifteen minutes. Thus you would appear from the Mobius at seven-fifteen, or fifteen

minutes before you went in. Are you in understanding?"

Parsons nodded. The Sound or the atomic pile was very loud in his ears. It was almost seven thirty. The thing that had been him had come out of the Mobius huge and slobbering and frightened. It had been shot to death on the PhySci building steps. It had smashed its head, and its blood was even now drying, into his pants.

He didn't want to be huge and frightened.

He didn't want to go back fifteen minutes in time.

He didn't want to be dead.

"My intentions were the best," Weaver went on. "You see, I've always leaned toward the cancellation theory." He rolled the cloth into a ball, unrolled it, rolled it again. Far away, someone beeped a klaxon horn--howoooogah!--and there was faint, pealing laughter.

"I believed that the paradox would he destroyed, cancelled, if you will, and not the universe. I believed that one of the two Wayne Parsons existing at the same moment of time would cancel out. And of course it would not matter which one; If Parsons-I, coming up those steps was cancelled, Wayne Parsons as an integral unit loses fifteen minutes of life. If Parsons-II cancelled, you would lose nothing at all."

"I don't like the sound of that," Parsons said.

Weaver waved a hand impatiently. "It's moot. The point is, neither theory seems to be correct. The universe has not been destroyed, and neither of you cancelled. But there <u>was</u> a physical change."

"A physical change," he agreed unsteadily. "Now there's a hell of a nice way to put it, Dr. Weaver. One hell of a delicate statement."

"But time is delicate," Weaver went on unhearing. "And I've dropped a stitch. Fod knows what may happen if I don't pick it up. The whole fabric of time might unravel around it. The consequences are quite literally unimaginable."

Parsons stared at him. There was a dryness in his throat.

"I never wanted to hurt anyone," Weaver said apologetically. "But now I'm afraid--"

"You're going to put me in there--"

"I'm afraid so--"

"--send me back to seven-fifteen--"

"--to complete the cycle--"

"--and kill me:"

"I've already killed you," Weaver said gently. "You are already dead."

A silence. Only the steady, throbbing beat of the pile and the thick thud of the blood in his ears.

"It's about time," Weaver told him. He gestured with the gun.

"I won't go," Parsons said suddenly. "You're going to have to shoot me now, Dr. And what is that going to do to your neat little timetable?"

"Don't he ridiculous," Weaver smiled. "I'll shoot you in the leg if I have to. From the looks of Parsons-II, I'd guess it will have at least forty years to heal. So why don't you save yourself pain and get up?"

Parsons suddenly felt hollow and useless, with no more free will than a chip of plywood in a gutter-flood.

They went into the Mobius room.

As always, it was hard to see when it was running. There were actually two of them, running opposite ways, sandwiched back to back. Two Mobiuses, but everyone knows a Mobius strip has only one side. Somewhere the two opposites met and merged and ran straight into the fourth dimension.

Or the fifth, Parsons thought. Or the twenty-fifth. And what the hell did it matter anyway?

"Get on," Weaver said.

It was making him dizzy. Parsons closed his eyes and felt his stomach knotting.

"Get on."

He stepped blindly forward, onto the moving platform between the two connected-unconnected strips. As he caught hold and swung up and on, a tingle of the electrostatic charge, that bound the two inextricably together ran up his arms. It began to move faster. Weaver swung awav from him, and he approached the far end of the room.

His arms clutched tight as the platform made a sickening halfloop that made his stomach shiver and gurgle.

Red firebrick whirled past. Doors flew by. The atomic pile thrummed.

Weaver's face came at him out of the whirling melange of objects. another twist in the strip, and suddenly there was a sickening reversal. He was being pulled two ways at once, backward and forward on two diverging strips leading into no-where.

He screamed. and the sound of his own voice was soundless.

His grip was suddenly gone, and he was flying away from the platform like a crumb spun off a plate. Something hard met him, and consciousness left him.

He came to in a rush, like a man awakening from a nightmare.

For a moment he held the fanatic belief that that was just what it had been tight against him, like a comforting teddy-bear. Then his hands, groping over the cold tile of the Mobius room convinced him that it was not.

He opened his eyes, sat up.

It was the Mobius room, and yet it wasn't. The Mobius stood silent and unmoving. The pile was silent. And the floor was gritty with dust.

He looked up and saw the stars.

He looked around and saw a hillside of red sawgrass, waving gently in a late twilight breeze. Far away, down the roll and swell of the grassland plain, huge trees stood in sillouette against the fading colours of the sunset.

The room petered out in all directions about ten feet out from the Mobius. The walls stopped some ten feet up. Half of the closet was cut away, and he could see someone's coat and half a briefcase.

He giggled.

A little dribble of laughter followed, and soon he was rocking back and forth on his heels, screaming with demented laughter and staring at the alien sky with bulging eyes.

He was in Limbo.

And even as his second hysteria began to spend itself, the inhabitants of limbo began to appear over the brow of the nearest hill.

Five days later, Wayne Parsons sat in a reclining, form-fitting chair on an airy, open terrace, munching a fruit.

Around him sat beautiful girls straight out of a men's magazine desert-island cartoon, staring at him with solemn, round eyes. One handed him another fruit, and he patted his thanks. He bit into it deeply, wiped juice from his chin, and arched his back a little. The chair obiediently became a couch, and he lay hack contentedly, tossing the fruit away.

They moved closer, and touched his face and chest and arms with light, wondering fingers. Soon he slept, and he slept contented, for it was all clear.

All clear...

It was another time entirely, a different universe entirely. It was the spaces between the pickets in a backyard fence. It was where the

stripes on the harbor-pole went when they got to the top end disappeared.

His time touched it only in one place, the place where the Mobius stood--forever inviolate and untouched by the quiet, solemn people who came and went like gusts of wind.

Someday it would operate again, and he would be old and fat. But even if--when--it did operate, why would he get on it? Why had he been on it? A revolt of the People? Ridiculous. A drastic change in the wheather or a natural disaster' Unlikely.

But perhaps it did not really matter.

Forty or fifty years, Weaver had said. Maybe longer than that; time seemed to move slower in the continuum. Maybe–

In the midst of his last maybe, Parsons fell asleep.

Some of the girls left. Some stayed. Some made dancing-rings in the sun, and some started out for the Hills, where the men lived.

The wind blew. Days and nights went by. Parsons ate, slept, and made love when the spirit moved him. Time passed.

Forty-seven years.

Wayne Parsons stood heavily on his feet, one hand clutching the pillar of the verandah for support. His breath came heavy in his throat. His belly bulged in huge, rolling waves, and the grey kilt he wore falpped between the momentous columns of his legs.

The Mobius had been running for the last sixteen months. He wondered idly how long that was in the other continuum. A second? Two? He might have been able to figure the ratio once, but his mind had gotten fat, too.

He wondered exactly why he was going back to the Mobius. He told himself it was because of the theory, but it wasn't that. That was like stating the symptoms to get around the cause.

He made himself think of the cause.

He was old. He was fat. He was ugly. And he had not been a novelty

for a very long time. Now the young girls laughed and scattered and eluded him, trilling unknown words that sounded very like insults. The fruit had no taste anymore, and there was no variation in the diet. There was no-one to talk to. There was not even a pet for company.

Those were the reasons, and not the theory. The theory just made it seem less like suicide.

It had come slowly, growing as his belly expanded and his muscles had loosened into spreading pads of loose tissue. It had gained clearness and detail as the days idled past, always sunshine and rolling red sawgrass fields, broken only by the fruit-trees, the Hills, and the rearing, unchanging mass of the Mobius and the cutaway room around it. And the idea had slowly taken on dimensions and become clear and necessary.

Dr. Weaver, not he, was the focal-point of the paradox.

It made a beautiful kind of sense. He could remember Dr. Weaver's words, long ago: Can you afford to find out?

Yes. Yes, he could afford it. For if Dr. Weaver could be eliminated before the other Wayne Parsons--slim and sapling straight with only twenty-three years--entered to Mobius, he would never enter it at all. He would find Dr. Weaver dead, but he most certainly would not climb onto the Mobius. And the sad lump of flesh that he had become would cancel out like an opposite-signed equation.

He wondered if cancellation would be painful. He doubted it, and was willing to risk it. His massive chest labored gelatinously for air, his heart pumped wheezily.

For one moment he let all the world flow in on him, seeing and hearing and feeling it for the last time. And then he began lumbering very slowly down to where the Mobius ran on and on, in dizzying unreality.

He forced himself to wait until the frightening palpitations of his heart had died away before moving to catch the platform. It had been

a long time since he had walked so far.

His belly rolled majestically as he reached forward, caught the rail, stepped up, and was whirled away.

The vertigo grabbed him.

Ocher sky, red sawgrass, trees, floor, cut-off walls all skidded past, tipped up, tipped down, righted, wronged.

His heart skipped, lost rhythym, and faltered alarmingly. His breath whistled through the cavern of his throat, and he squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

The gun, he thought. A long time ago he had a gun...

Suddenly he was being pulled in two directions at once. A last sickening twist, and he was through. The Mobius was flowing the other way, and he was through.

"Parsons? Par--me God. Oh, my God."

Parsons stepped heavily from the Mobius and felt the dizziness and nausea clogging his throat. But this time he didn't fall.

The room was whole.

The big clock said 7:15.

Dr. Weaver was staring at him, face a pasty mask of horrified realization.

"What happened? What in the name of God happened to you, Parsons?"

The gun was in his hand, but in his shock, Weaver was no more aware of it than he was of his fingers.

Parsons lumbered toward him, wheezing.

"It's wrong," Weaver was whispering. "Wrong, wrong, wrong--"

Parsons felt his heart hesitate again, then push itself on, like a runner in sight of the tape.

"I think it's going to work out," Parsons said. His voice was cracked and harsh; there had been no occaision to use it much for almost

half a century. "I maybe Father time takes care of his own." There was a wrench on the worktable, and he closed his hand over it.

Weaver suddenly became aware of the gun in him hand. He raised it.

Parsons threw the wrench.

The target-pistol went off, and an empty cartridge-case jumped.

The Mobius blurred on, endless and one-sided.

Wayne Parsons twitched his nose and slapped his free hand on the gold granite snout of the gryphon that guarded the main door of the PhySci building. Yes, there was something a little offcenter about Dr. Weaver, but offcenter or no, he was still flattered that he had gotten the call and not Brooks or that Swiss student, Johannes.

Far down the hallway, he could hear someone moving ponderously, clumsily, very slowly. Someone very big, from the sound.

Yes, flattered. And excited as hell, he admitted to himself. Excited at getting a chance to do some extra homework on Old Man Mobius.

The thumping footsteps grew louder. Someone running.

Parsons looked up at the heavy glass doors, and for a second strange, misshapen shadow loomed on the sunset-struck glass.

Then it was gone.

He ran up the steps, threw open the doors, and stared in. The long hall was empty.

Downstairs, the Mobius was running.